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Risk governance in Nepal: Reflecting on experiences with Risk and Resilience Committees

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Abstract

This paper reports on fieldwork in Nepal, which produces a comparison between two communities of their perception and experience of risk. In particular, it explores contrasting ideas of risk governance based upon a community survey as well as in depth interviews with risk and resilience committee members. The paper moves to a tentative conclusion that suggests, in more urban areas the existence of a formal structure embedded in local government is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for disaster risk reduction; in contrast, in rural areas disaster risk reduction discourse is more difficult because of the overwhelming priority of maintaining livelihood security.

Keywords:

Community based disaster risk reduction, Nepal, livelihoods, risk and resilience

Introduction

This paper explores community based disaster risk reduction and locally based disaster risk reduction (embedded in local government) drawing on some 'action research' conducted in Nepal.

Community Based Disaster Risk Reduction (CBDRR)

Community based disaster risk reduction emerges from the rationale that communities have the capacity and knowledge to reduce disaster risk. CBDRR was promoted by the Hyogo Framework and is consistent with the decentralization agenda. In Nepal, decentralisation has been facilitated by the local Self-Governance Act of 1999.

Academic perspectives

There are four broadly related concerns that emerge in the academic literature.

First it has been noted that effective CB approaches need strong state support (Veron 2006) but DM in poorer countries is characterised by missing expertise of the state (Rajan 2002).

Second, in community driven development it has been argued that Poor and marginalised groups may not get their interests met as local elites may capture resources (Pelling 2007, Veron 2006).

Third, it has been suggested that CBDRR may be an added burden to communities, especially when not matched by resources (Allen 2006, Mansuri and Rao 2004) and where livelihood strengthening is a higher priority for local people than disaster preparedness (Paton and Johnson 2001, Chen, Liu and Chen 2006).

Finally, it has been noted that there is little research on effective institutional arrangements (Rajan 2002) or factors promoting/ undermining community institutions (Coombes 2007).

Research Questions

These academic concerns have influenced the research questions for this project and these are as follows:

1. Where does 'the community' think responsibility for DM should lie?
2. To what extent do CBDRR institutions represent the interests of marginalised/vulnerable groups?
3. How are communities interested or motivated in DRR (are they only interested in livelihood strengthening)?
4. What institutional arrangements are most effective, sustainable and show greatest capacity for DRR?

Introducing the Risk and Resilience Committees

The research case studies were facilitated through a DelPHE project awarded to Dr Andrew Collins in conjunction with Kathmandu University, entitled 'People centred hazard and vulnerability mitigation for DRR in Nepal and Bangladesh'.

The project has enabled a number of exchange visits and seminars, and has led to the establishment of two risk and resilience committees. Quoting Komal Raj Aryal, (Research Associate of Northumbria University, Newcastle): "*Municipal or village platforms that monitor, record and promote localised DRR and dialogue.*"

The two RRC case studies are quite different in that one can be regarded as an example of community based disaster risk reduction (as a CBO) while the other is an example of locally based disaster risk reduction (an independent group but embedded within local government).

The first of the two RRCs was formed in the Panchkhal Valley, approximately 30 km east of Kathmandu and is near to Kathmandu University. It is a relatively rural location and is an important area for vegetable production supplying Kathmandu. It was established through a series of participatory workshops which included: hazard and vulnerability mapping; identifying the most vulnerable groups; matrix ranking of risks; and spider diagrams to explore priorities for risk reduction.

A community based organisation was formed and committee members included a chair of the VDC and other local group leaders (women's, cooperative, scheduled castes).

Their activities have been overseen by Kathmandu University and academics have attended the RRC meetings. So far, the RRC has constructed a holding board to publicise their existence; they have established a relief and compensation fund for

people affected by disasters and they have planned a pesticide awareness training programme.

The second case study is from Dhankuta Municipality in the east of Nepal. It is an area which is slightly more urbanised. The establishment of the RRC there can be attributed to the interest and enthusiasm of the Acting Mayor who through connections made between Northumbria University and the Ministry, attended an early seminar at Kathmandu University. He decided to establish the RRC and integrated it into local government structures. As a result, he has been able to secure funds from the Ministry of Local Development. He selected the committee members himself. So far they have similarly established a holding board and relief fund. They are also actively engaged in keeping a register of risks/disasters and have reduced the risk of road accidents through improved traffic management. They are also planning some vulnerability mapping.

Methodology

The two methods used were in-depth qualitative interviews with committee members of the two RRCs and a quantitative questionnaire survey of 200 members of the wider community in each location. RRC meetings were also attended. The research can be viewed very much as action research project in the sense that researchers actively shape the conditions in which they research, not only establishing the RRCs themselves but also feeding findings of the survey back to the RRCs.

Research Findings

The first question '*With whom disaster management and disaster risk reduction responsibility should lie?*' was asked directly within the community survey. It was expected that respondents' answers would reflect to some extent, their assessment of the capability of the government *vis a vis*, other institutions; whether disaster risk reduction would be considered an added burden for the community and the extent to which risk management is individualised.

The pie charts (Figures 1 and 2) show quite marked differences between Dhankuta and Panchkhal. In Panchkhal, DRR is seen to be much more of an individualised and family level concern, whereas, at Dhankuta, emphasis is placed on local government and village associations. It may be hypothesised that this has something to do with how the recent Maoist conflict has played in the two areas. In Panchkhal, people are quite secretive about their political allegiances and as a result, there has been a break down in trust in the area. In Dhankuta, people are very open about their politics and community cohesion seems not to have declined as a result. Perhaps in Dhankuta, also because the Acting Mayor is not affiliated with any political party, the local government apparatus has continued to function better. This may in turn have created slightly more favourable attitudes towards central government.

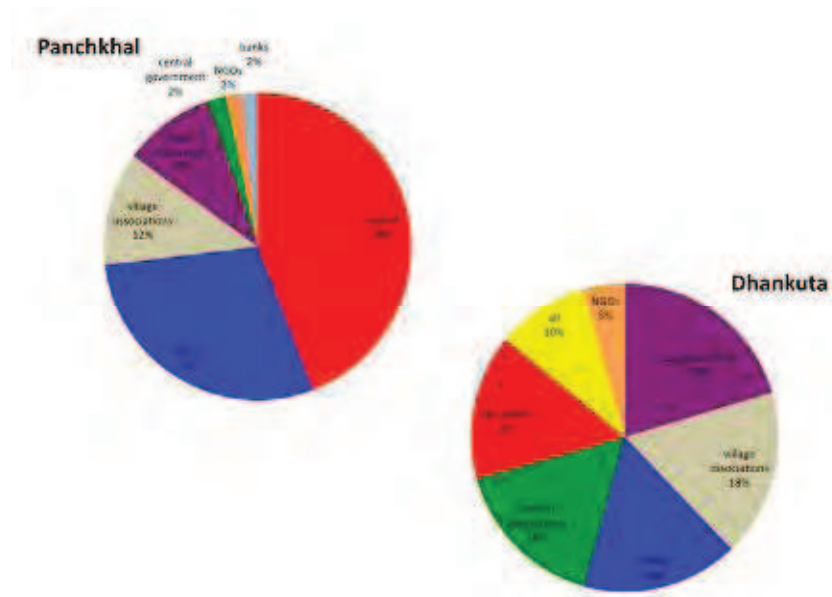


Figure 1 and 2 'With whom should responsibility for disaster management/ disaster risk reduction lie?'

The second question: *"To what extent does the RRC represent the wider community?"* was explored in two ways; firstly, through the opinions of committee members and the caste and gender composition of the committee and secondly, through exploring the level of congruence between what the RRCs and what the wider community consider to be risk priorities.

Both committees were very mindful of caste and gender composition and as a result, representation of women and minority groups on the committee was strong. However, it was recognised that some individuals were quite silent in meetings.

In Dhankuta, an effort had been made to remedy this, and a women from a scheduled caste had been sent on a computer training course in an effort to raise her confidence.

In Panchkhal, however, one woman from a scheduled caste suggested she was only a token member of the committee. She argued that while some of the members of the RRC had the interests of the most vulnerable at heart, others did not. She said that so far, only relatively wealthy community members had benefited from relief money when their dwellings had been affected by fire. She thought that the pesticide awareness training was a good idea but it needed to be offered as a priority to landless labourers. She thought that it was more likely to be offered to people in the Central Valley who are wealthier farmers of higher castes.

In order to examine the third question about level of congruence between risk priorities of the community compared with the committee, the risk concerns to have emerged in the community survey were compared with what activities the committee have chosen to prioritise. In Panchkhal, the risk concerns were wide ranging (Figure 3). Deforestation is the main concern but in theory, this can be addressed by existing community forestry institutions. The RRC have decided to focus on pesticide reduction, which was only the eighth concern of the wider community. However, when these results were fed back to the committee, they argued that some of the disease/illness risk (ranked second) also related to pesticide use. Drought was another concern of the RRC, which was ranked fourth by the community after literacy,

which arguably would be outside of the remit of an RRC. Thus, the RRC may not be addressing the key risk concerns but these may be the responsibility of other institutions. The RRC are addressing concerns that are not addressed elsewhere.

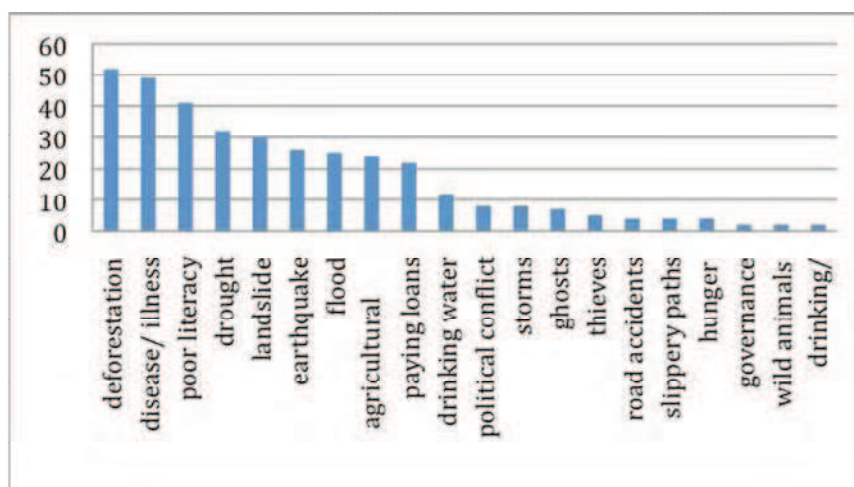


Figure 3: Community perceptions of risks, hazards and disasters in Panchkhal

In Dhankuta, a wide range of risks was also identified (Figure 4). The RRC so far has chosen to focus on road accident minimisation through speed limit setting, developing a one-way system in the town and bus driver training. This was the second concern to be ranked the highest after floods and landslides. While floods and landslides may be more challenging for the RRC to address, they had channelled relief funds to landslide victims, showing a high level of congruence between committee actions and community concerns.

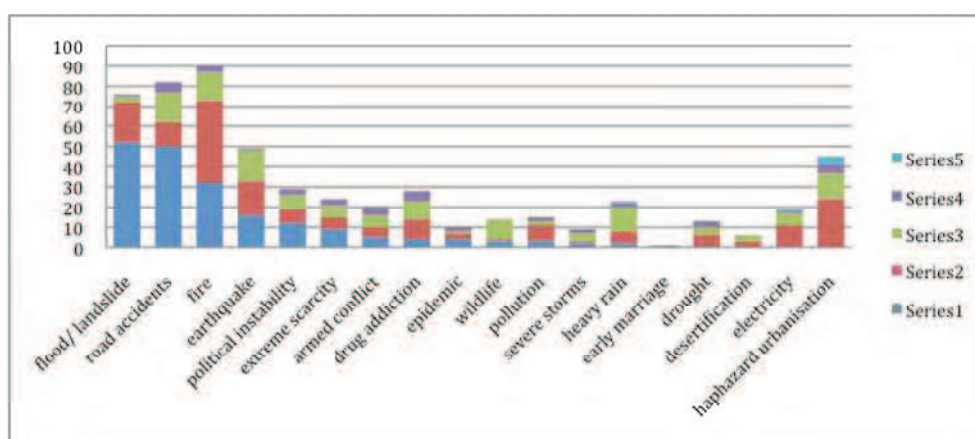


Figure 4: Community perception of potential risks, hazards and disasters in Dhankuta

Two indicators were explored to examine the level of motivation at the community level to engage in DRR. The first was the motivation of the committee members themselves and the second was the priorities of the wider community in terms of DRR relative to livelihood-strengthening activities.

In Panchkhal, motivation at the committee level was high among key male members who already held positions of authority in the community. However, it was lower among those who had to travel further or who were from more excluded groups.

Meetings had become more irregular and less frequent as some members would only attend if expenses were covered and unfortunately, funding through Kathmandu University to cover these expenses had not materialised.

In Dhankuta the members who had been selected by the Acting Mayor demonstrated a high level of social conscience. They were happy to be voluntary members but did not want to commit to much more than attending monthly meetings. In terms of what the RRC should do in Panchkhal (Figure 5), the community suggested many activities. Although awareness-raising featured as the main priority, many other suggested activities were about livelihood strengthening than DRR.

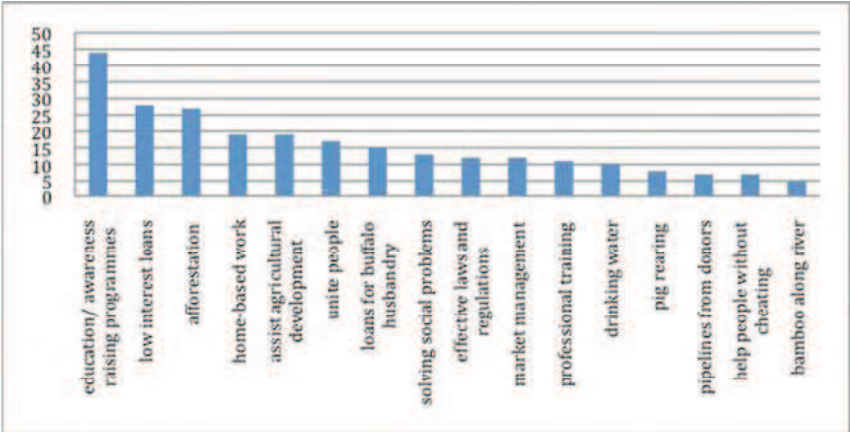


Figure 5: What should the RRC do (Panchkhal)?

In Dhankuta, significantly greater emphasis was placed on awareness-raising relative to livelihood strengthening (Figure 6), suggesting a higher level of receptivity to DRR in the community.

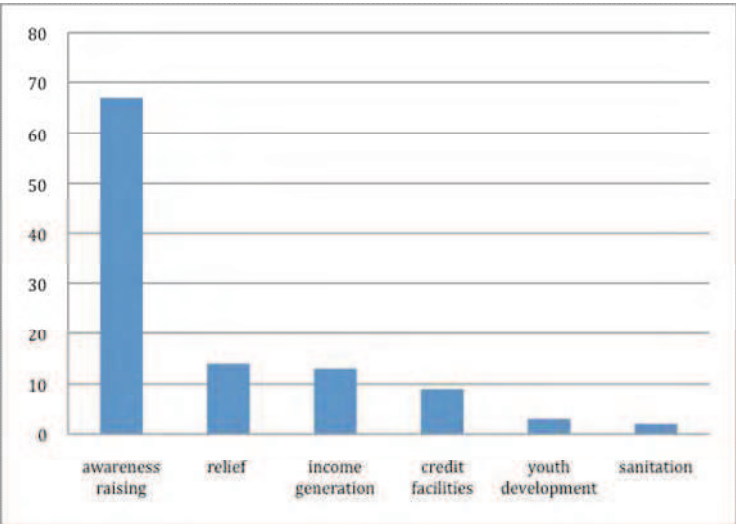


Figure 6: What should the RRC do (Dhankuta)?

The final question relates to the most effective institutional arrangements for DRR and includes issues of capacity and the importance of financial resources.

Both committees showed high levels of administrative capacity in terms of organising meetings, taking minutes, distributing minutes, etc., but some members of both committees were a little unsure about what RRCs should do. This was more

pronounced in Panchkhal. In Panchkhal, funding issues prevented the pesticide awareness training from happening, illustrating the necessity of securing funding for RRCs to work effectively. The link between Kathmandu University and the RRC had led to some confusion about who was driving the agenda and as such, a slow responsiveness to new key risk priorities such as drought, was reported. There has been some difference of opinion within the committee about whether to register as an NGO or to get approval to become embedded within the local government structure. Neither of these courses of action has yet been pursued and as a result, no additional funds have been secured. As a CBO, accountability and transparency mechanisms are not really in place although this may be facilitated by Kathmandu University's role.

In Dhankuta progress has been more significant, not least because further funding has been secured and the RRC has been allocated an annual budget through the Ministry of Local Development. At the level of the municipality, a disaster risk reduction lens is being applied to existing responsibilities, such as land use planning and traffic management. The municipality is well connected to the emergency services that are essential in disaster recovery, such as the police and the army. They are also well connected to community-based organisations, known as Tole Lane Organisations in Nepal. There was a sense though; that the municipality sees its role as feeding information down to community based organisations rather than adopting a bottom-up participatory approach with two-way communication. One good idea to have been implemented was to ensure that the RRC members represent different political parties so should political leadership change; the RRC members can stay the same. There is also a strong sense of local responsibility for disaster risk reduction at this level and accountability and transparency mechanisms are in place as part of the local government structure.

Conclusion

To conclude, there is a lack of consensus on where responsibility for disaster risk reduction should lie, perhaps shaped by the uncertainty of political allegiance, which varies by place. Broadly, the committees were addressing communities' concerns. However these were to a greater extent produced risks – road accidents and pesticide risk – which perhaps the committees felt in a better position to influence than environmental hazards such as floods, landslides, which may be regarded as more 'everyday risks'.

In Dhankuta, there may have been some elite control in terms of developing the DRR agenda but patronage was dispersed equally among the population. However, in Panchkhal, there were signs that deeply embedded power relations may overshadow and inhibit true representation of marginalised and vulnerable groups thus leading to a poorer quality DRR process.

While disaster management capacity is not particularly strong, the institutionally embedded arrangements show greatest potential in terms of accessing resources and applying a DRR lens to existing responsibilities. By providing an annual budget to the RRC it suggests that resources as well as responsibility may be being devolved, presenting less of an 'added burden' to communities.

At the CBO level however, livelihood-strengthening activities may be more appropriate than addressing the infrastructural targets generated by community ranking of disaster risk in the municipality. However, both require a social understanding of risk rather than the simple provision of top-down engineering "blue light" responses.

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